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Untold Stories
Women in the Civil War

The American Civil War occupies a paramount place in national memory. The conflict marked a turning point in the history of the United States, ending slavery as well as integrating and centralizing the Northern States in a fight to save the Union. Much attention to the confrontation highlights the military campaigns and strategies; yet, the war could not have continued without the efforts of the home front. In particular, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton stated in her autobiography, "The story of the Civil War will never be fully written if the achievements of women are left untold."[1] Many opportunities exist at historic sites, battlefields, and museums to tell of those achievements. Some sites have already started expanding their interpretation in many areas, including the role of women in the Civil War, while others are just beginning to explore the numerous sources that were previously ignored. The following are only a few examples of the wealth of materials available to researchers, interpreters, and museum professionals interested in presenting a more inclusive story of the Civil War — one that includes the myriad experiences of women.

Once the war began and thousands of men volunteered for military service, equal numbers of women saw an obligation to bring their unique talents, capabilities, and understandings to the forefront.[2] Their motives for joining the activities of the Civil War were as diverse as those of the men. Some had a pure and simple desire to serve their country. Others had sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, or lovers in the army, and served to be near, either physically or spiritually, the object of their love. Others felt a religious calling. Some threw themselves into charitable activities to soothe the pain of bitter bereavement. Many women, having lost their sole breadwinner, had no choice but to leave the safety of their home and go to work. For whatever reasons they joined, women's involvement gave them experience in public life. Hundreds of thousands of women from all classes, races, ethnicities, and ages volunteered in numerous ways. A small number of women became camp followers, while others, like Julia Dent Grant, wife of General Ulysses S. Grant, occasionally visited their husbands to tend their needs, lift their spirits, and give them a glimpse of their children.[3] A few women worked as couriers, spies, camp cooks, or prostitutes. Some disguised themselves as men to serve on the battlefields.

The vast majority of women performed typical domestic tasks associated with benevolent works such as taking care of the supplies, meals, and hospital quarters of the soldiers. They organized Soldiers' Aid Societies, Sewing Circles, Soldiers' Homes, and Homes for Refugees.[4] They visited suspected sympathizers with the express intent of spying.[5] They formed thousands of societies for relief, where they raised funds, collected clothing and supplies, made uniforms, rolled bandages, prepared meals, ministered to the sick and wounded, wrote letters of information and comfort, provided reading materials, offered consolation, supplied encouragement, taught basic reading and writing skills, and trained other women in benevolent work. Northern and southern women assisted in the inspection of army camps and labored in hospitals, first aid camps, and floating hospital ships.

When the fighting began, the U.S. Army had no general hospital. There were only military and post hospitals, with the largest containing only 40 beds. There were no female nurses at all, and the male nurses had little or no professional training. In 1861, Miss Dorothea L. Dix, widely known for her work with prisoners and the insane, received the appointment of General Superintendent of the Nurses of Military Hospitals. Dix initially recruited women to train as nurses from a core of healthy, strong, well-educated women between the ages of 25 and 50; but as the war progressed many other women joined the ranks of nursing in formal and informal positions. According to one doctor, these women "changed the bloody, torn, and muddy garments of the wounded soldiers; bathed them; [and] performed all kinds of manual work."[6]

The nurses took on more responsibilities than ministering to those wounded in battle. As one St. Louis nurse, Emily Parsons, noted, she cared for nearly 400 sick men when she arrived in Cairo, IL. Some had diphtheria, others erysipelas, cholera, measles, smallpox, scurvy, consumption,

malaria, dysentery, and other illnesses. Additionally, these women were concerned for the diets of the men. The monotonous army diet of hard bread, salted meat, and coffee without milk needed to be supplemented with fruits, vegetables, and dairy products; and inexperienced soldiers needed to learn about proper drainage in the camps and how to set up the tents for maximum ventilation. Parsons and others took it upon themselves to give proper attention to the dietary needs and hygiene of the soldiers.[7]

The various sanitary commissions, as well as the United States Christian Commission, the Ladies Union Aid Society (LUAS), the Colored Union Society, and other relief agencies ministered to the armies and refugees. The principal auxiliary of the Western Sanitary Commission, the LUAS, formed in July 1861. The women members provided prompt, supportive, and enduring service to the Union. They demonstrated their pro-Union political stand from the start, using red, white, and blue stationery imprinted with "Union Forever" for all correspondence, and each lady flew a silk Union flag at her home.[8] They operated several homes for refugees and escaped slaves and coordinated volunteer workers in the camps, hospitals, and orphan asylums.[9]

While most of the women working for the war effort volunteered their services, there were others in need of wages to supplement their income. The LUAS helped women in need of employment obtain Government contract work. The first contract for sewing hospital garments and bedding grossed $6,130 for 127,550 items and employed 500 women who worked out of their homes making the items with material supplied by the Government through a private contractor. Spurred by the success of this endeavor, the LUAS sought additional Government contracts; and by 1864 the organization had secured all the hospital garment work for the Department of the West. The women completed 3,000 – 4,000 items per week, receiving an average wage of $3 – $4 a week. It is not clear whether these women worked prior to the war, but they undoubtedly contributed to the economic welfare of their family while at the same time helping the war effort.

According to historian Drew Gilpin Faust, few southern women were salaried hospital workers, and their efforts in the care of the sick and wounded continued only through the end of the war. In contrast, many northern women used this opportunity to continue in the "public sphere" after the war, expanding their role as nurturers from the home to the workplace. Faust's work on southern women, "Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War," is an excellent source for exploring the changing roles of women during and after the war.[10]

As slaves fled north to freedom, they increasingly found cities overcrowded and overwhelmed with the needs of the refugees. Organizations such as the Freedmen's Relief Society stepped in to supply food, clothing, shelter and further assistance. Among other things the freedmen received "clothing...the expenses of their journey...[and] homes, mostly in the Free States.[11] The assigned hospitals cared for the sick and dying freedmen and offered them spiritual comfort.

Schools for the refugees were established in the North; and despite acts of violence and prejudice, children and adults received education in elementary studies and civilization as well as cooking, housework, and laundry skills. Some northern women volunteered to go to the South to teach the illiterate freedmen. Miss Maria R. Mann, an educator from Massachusetts, presents an example of what the women found in these areas and demonstrates the work they did. Mann left for Helena, AR, in January 1863 to help with the special relief of several hundred black families gathered and living in miserable conditions in "Camp Ethiopia." Mann reported that they worked under a forced system of labor, "driven by mounted orderlies to work on the fortifications, and to unload steamboats and coal barges; and discharged at night without compensation or a comfortable shelter."[12] Miss Mann arrived and set up a hospital to supply the "contrabands"[13] with clothing, sanitary goods, and physical aid. With the cooperation of the chaplains and Major General Prentiss, she promptly took charge of staffing, obtained better camping grounds, supervised the building of shelters, established a school for the children, and saw that the women learned the rudimentary tasks of caring for their families. She also taught the women how to cut and make useful garments. Thanks to the efforts of Mann and her staff, their plight changed from "utter misery and despair, to one of thrift, improvement and comparative happiness."[14]

Records of black women in the late 19th century, especially personal accounts, are more difficult to locate; but we do know that women slaves who fled north often had no possessions, no money, and no job, yet they did acquire their freedom. Arriving in large cities, they were usually given food, shelter, and education. Some of the women received training in nursing and took care of soldiers and refugees at hospitals designated for African Americans. It is assumed these women continued to work when the war ended, but it is unclear what their specific jobs were.

The story of women during the Civil War is not only the story of the work that they did to support the war effort through charitable and hospital work. Much information can also be gleaned from letters, journals, and reminiscences that explain the effects of the war on those left behind to manage affairs while the men were at the front. Women took on the tasks of running farms and plantations, handling financial matters, working in the factories to keep men in uniforms and weapons, and teaching; all of which were previously reserved to males, especially in the South.[15] Given the numbers of men who left their homes to serve in the war, the impact on women's day-to-day lives is clear. Whether they desired the power that the absence of the men gave them or not, women found themselves struggling, and succeeding, at managing family and business affairs.

Discussion of how women's lives and roles were transformed is crucial to understanding the changes that took place throughout the nation during the war and Reconstruction. Local historical societies and archives, family histories, and many other organizations are available to assist those who are seeking primary source materials to expand their interpretive and educational programs. Just as sites now talk about the valor and daily experiences of the individual men on the battlefield, the women who supported the war in the public and private spheres deserve to have their stories told. A more inclusive study of the past has the added benefit of including groups that previously felt little connection to a site because their stories appeared to be unimportant, if not nonexistent.

Notes

1 Elizabeth Cady Stanton, et al., *The History of Woman Suffrage* (Rochester: Susan B. Anthony, 1881), 82-83.

2 Brockett and Vaughn estimate that hundreds of thousands of women answered the call to help their country throughout the war. L. P. Brockett and Mary C. Vaughn, *Woman's Work in the Civil War: A Record of Heroism, Patriotism and Patience* (Philadelphia: Zeigler, McCurdy & Co., 1867), 57.

3 While it is known that Julia Dent Grant did tend to the needs of her husband, General Ulysses S. Grant, and did other things for the Union effort, the General forbade her from joining the women bringing supplies for the sick and wounded to the front, for when she "returned [from the hospitals] each time laden with petitions for discharges," he would say, "I hear of these all day long and I sent for you to come that I might have a rest from all this sad part. I do not want you to know about these things. I want you to tell me of the children and yourself. I want and need a little rest and sunshine." *Julia Dent Grant, The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant (Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant)* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 125.

4 Twentieth-century USOs are patterned after the Soldier's Aid Societies.

5 William G. B. Carson, "Secesh," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin* 23:2 (January 1967):140-1.

6 Simon Pollak, *The Autobiography and Reminiscences of S. Pollak, M.D., St. Louis, Mo.* (St. Louis: St. Louis Medical Review, 1904), 269-72.

7 Emily Elizabeth Parsons, *Memoir of Emily Elizabeth Parsons*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1880), Letter III dated January 29, 1863, from Emily Parsons to her mother.

8 Mrs. Hannah Stagg, "Local Incidents of the Civil War," *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 5:67 (January 1910).

9 Third Annual Report of the Ladies' Union Aid Society of St. Louis, 1864, LUAS records, 10.

10 Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Homefront" *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), 87; Drew Gilpin Faust, *Mothers of Invention: Women of the Slaveholding South in the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996).

11 "The Annual Report of the Freedmen's Relief Society, of St. Louis, Mo., for 1863," Missouri Historical Society, p. 3

12 Frank Moore, *Women of the War: Their Heroism and Self-Sacrifice* (Hartford: S.S. Scranton & Co., 1867), 698.

13 "Contraband" was the term used to describe those slaves who escaped from their owners and sought refuge behind Union lines. At the start of the war, slaveowners attempted to enter Union camps to search for and recapture runaway slaves under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. They were declared contraband by the military, and as such could be confiscated by the army during the war to deprive Confederates of the labor of the enslaved.

14 Ibid., 700.

15 Faust, "The Civil War Homefront," *Rally on the High Ground: The National Park Service Symposium on the Civil War* (Fort Washington, PA: Eastern National, 2001), 84.

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